

Quality assurance in Vietnam's higher education: Insights into past and present challenges

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ABSTRACT

Vietnam higher education has attempted innovations in increased efforts to integrate well into the world's education. One of the most prominent innovative activities is quality assurance. Adopting a historical approach, this paper presents the Vietnam higher education quality assurance renovating process including three phases: the centrally planned economy period (1954–1986), the reform period (1986–2000) and the international integration period (2000–2017). At each stage, it is referred to the perspective, the system, the mechanism, and the achievements of Vietnam higher education quality assurance. By taking a historical stance, the paper presented the continued advance of higher education management, the role and significance of quality assurance as an integration commitment of Vietnam education in the context of globalization.

Keywords: higher education, quality assurance, training, Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance in higher education has a development history over two centuries. In the early of the 19th century, countries such as England, France and Italy applied quality assessment standards to verify the quality of universities (Charles, 2007). In United States of America, the quality control system was first implemented in 1905 (Nga, 2010). Towards the end of the 20th century, in the trend of globalization, the education quality has become a common trend in most countries, not only in developed countries in Europe (Netherlands, Belgium, Germany), but also in developing countries in Asia, Latin America and the Gulf region (Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Arabic Saudi, Chile...) (Quyen, 2017). Quality assurance activities relate to the management mechanism as well as the activities of a higher education institutions. The quality assurance of a higher education institution will provide the community, particularly the students with the assurance that the institution satisfied with students' requirements. Quality assurance activities also represent the national culture context and its higher education development (Cuong, 2017).

Quality assurance in Vietnam's higher education has received increased attention and become a major mission at both management and training organizations. Quality assurance survey assesses achievements or problems of quality assurance activities thereby it can improve training program. Through quality assurance activities, researchers have more documents to assess the degree of integration of Vietnamese higher education into the world education in globalization. This paper presents research result on the quality assurance of Vietnamese higher education in a three-stage process based on the perspective of the quality of higher education, namely the central-planned economy, the reform period, and the international integration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

On a global scale, research in higher education quality assurance activities have paid attention studies on quality assurance models in functionalism perspective (Harvey and Green, 1993; Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, & Părlea, 2007; Wilger, 1997; Woodhouse, 1999). Many researchers have investigated accreditation procedure and types. The United States of America, Germany, France, have applied accreditation on training programs and institutions (Kis, 2005). Southeast Asian have engaged well in quality assurance practices (SEAMEO RIHED, 2012). Some studies approach the issue of assessing the

education quality including the assessment of institutions and curriculum. According to Kis (2005), quality assessment is commonly applied in Europe where quality assessment of training programs accounts for about 53% of quality assurance organizations, the number of educational institutions accounted for 22%; Countries such as Denmark, Finland, and the United Kingdom have applied education quality assessment approaches in Denmark, Finland, and the United Kingdom. Some authors have published overview studies of the quality assurance of higher education in the nation recently. Typically, Eaton (2015) researched on the positions, roles and responsibilities of independent accreditation bodies, identified and improved the quality assurance standards of the United States. Lisa Brockerhoff, Jeroen Huisman, Melissa Laufer (2015) published an overview study of the quality assurance in higher education in Netherlands...

In Vietnam, higher education quality assurance has been taken increasingly seriously. Ngoc (2004) addressed issues related to training quality and its improvement, with focuses on principles of good learning and university autonomy. According to Ngoc (2004, p.13), "training products are special products, its value is assessed by social rules"; "The training product has a value scale (quality scale) depending on the training institution, the training system and the training program". Many institutions in their training are greatly concerned with these four core values: trained knowledge, practical skills, cognitivethinking ability, and human qualities. Over the years, Vietnamese higher education has upgraded its training in political ideology, life values, knowledge, skills and academic quality Chau, Loan, and Ry (2007). This process has also been systematically consolidated in documentation such as handbooks, curriculum revision, and academic publications (Nga, 2010). Some of those documents focuses strategically on practical problems and proposed solutions. For example, scholars such as Hao (2015) and Quyen (2014) provide accounts of a more efficient accreditation systems. Ngoc and Giang (2016) investigated the relationship between internal quality assurance and external quality assurance. Cuong (2017) stretched the above discourse by proposing an assurance model, among other works that aim at quality assurance improvement. Quyen (2017) discussed on initial difficulties of accreditation.

Although the academic community has paid great attention to higher education quality assurance accreditation, this area has not been well documented in any study as far as historical progress of Vietnam higher education quality assurance is concerned. This article is an attempt to document a historical overview of this area in the Vietnamese context. Being developed on the foundation of a historical approach, this discussion presents the progress of perspectives, solutions and achievements of Vietnam higher education quality assurance. Each period of education in the discussion is identified in terms of its establishment, development, strengths and weaknesses of Vietnam higher education quality assurance. The article's material resources are research works into the Vietnam education history (1945–2017), with most publications in Vietnam, including the reports, the education management organizations' directives directly related to the higher education quality assurance.

3. RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Higher education quality assurance in the centrally planned economy period (1954–1986)

From 1954 (in the North) and from 1975 (in the South) to 1986, Vietnam maintained centrally planned economy. All economic and social activities followed the state plan. For higher education, State Planning Committee launched plan for the training and employing graduates (Giang, Nghien, and Truc, 1995). Under the under - developed economy, the size of higher education was small. According to Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], (1995), in the period 1954–1975, Vietnamese students did not exceed 100,000; an average of 2.9 students per ten thousand people. Table 1 showed that the total number of students remained very low.

TABLE 1. Universities and students in 1961–1970 (MOET, 1995)

Year	Number of universities	Number of students
1961	10	13,640
1962	11	21,335
1963	12	25,707
1964	13	28,853
1965	17	29,337
1966	21	34,213

1967	22	48,402
1968	41	58.159
1969	41	71.414
1970	41	69.902

After the 1975 re-unification of Vietnam, higher education has witnessed an increase in number of universities and students. Despite this, the country has suffered from prolonged economic and social crisis that affected education equality. In the early 1980s, the government launched a policy known as "Cease to employ permanent officials". According to Lê Văn Giang et al. (1995), in the period 1975–1985, the number of universities and students had increased dramatically. For example, in 1976, the whole country had 59 universities, 92,100 students; in 1981, there were 85 universities, 153,671 students; In 1985, there were 95 universities, 126,195 students. The average was about 2.1 students per ten thousand people. On a very small scale, higher education was considered as "elite education", higher education quality assurance had not been regarded as a development factor. For a long time, Vietnamese higher education had maintained a quality management through input-output highly competitive exams. In order to attend the universities, students had to take difficult competitive entrance exams.

From 1955 to 1970, since the MOET was established, it promulgated the regulation reorganizing national examinations, conducted them in local schools, and divided curriculum content into three specialized knowledge: A, B, C. The government allocated universities the low enrollment quota, on average each university only recruited a few dozen or hundreds, when entering the "threshold" college, students obviously became "elite class" and really elite to be recruited (Giang et al., 1995). Having passed the entrance examination, education quality was assessed by rigorous examinations such as semester final exams and the graduation exam. The Ministry of Higher Education and Vocational Schools assessed education quality not only through examinations but also through inspection system to supervise admissions, training and examinations at various levels. During this period, however, inspections were mainly for the detection of errors, collective and individual penalties in violation of standard regulations. The purpose of inspection, unfortunately, was not to improve the education quality (MOET, 1995).

3.2. Vietnam higher education quality assurance in the Reform period (1986–2000)

In 1986, the sixth National Party Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party launched the National Reform policy whereby the education quality improved to provide high quality human resources to the requirements of the society. Higher education institutions maximized opportunities for learners. To achieve the above objectives, the education carried out programs and measures to improve the scale and quality of education. In the period 1987–1990, Vietnam higher education had with three action programs to create the foundation for innovation:

The first one was to reform the structure, systems, goals, and higher education methods. The quality assurance of this program was to "modernize content, stimulate positive learning through quality assessment" and to "design multi - stage training programs, build a multi-level school" (Giang et al., 1995). Therefore, higher training was divided into two phases: (1) the 1st phase (also called general training) was the whole program, content conducted by the MOET; (2) the 2nd phase was a special training program designed by universities and assessed by the MOET. Together with these solutions, the MOET also conducted the renovation of teaching and learning methods, supported modern teaching equipment, carried out pilot quiz final exam in 1994 and entirely one in 1995.

The aim of the 2nd phase was to promote scientific research and to improve equipment's in education institutions. It seeks out ways to develop scientific research for the learning, apply research results into production and daily life, encourage students to participate in scientific research, and promoting international cooperation. The aim of the 3rd phase was to reform organization and management for improving the quality of teaching and management staff, as well as implementing three measures of standardization for teaching staff and employment policy.

In 1995, having carried out the 4th Party Central Committee (term 7) and the resolution of the 2nd Party Central Committee (term 8), higher education reformed significantly in response to the demand of human resource in the national socio-economic conditions in industrialization and modernization. The quality assurance's aim was to concentrate on training program. The MOET rearranged university networks, expanded training scale, renovated lecturers management and conducted universities training two - stage program (overview and specialty), renovating of teaching methods. These positive policies and measures, along with the training funding from state budget and students pay tuition made higher education quality

advanced. However, quality management was not adequately evaluated due to lack of assessment mechanisms.

3.3. The process of establishing the principle of quality assurance (2000–2017)

In the 20th century, Vietnam has gone through a industrializing and modernizing process whereby the socio-economy has developed significantly. In this context, higher education has responded to both students' learning need and high quality human resources. The 2001–2010 socio-economic development strategy which was adopted at the 9th National Party Congress confirmed to develop and improve the quality of graduate and postgraduate education; to concentrate on constructing national universities whose quality were as good as the quality of regional and international universities. In order to ensure the quality of tertiary education it was necessary to set up both internal and external quality assurance systems thereby the MOET established the quality assurance department under the Department of Higher Education in January 2002. And this department became the Department of Educational Testing and Accreditation in July 2003.

The Department of Quality Assurance and Accreditation was the highest advisory organization in establishing quality assurance system and mechanism of the national education. In collaboration with this central management, many universities also established their quality assurance sectors, keeping specific criteria in mind, including the aspiration towards renovating higher education training programs and training approaches, as well as improved curricula for national reality and international integration. For quality assurance, the directive stated that it was necessary to strengthen the quality management of education and training activities, to complete the higher education quality assurance accreditation organization structure (MOET, 2004a).

Subsequently, the MOET issued decision on the provisional the regulation on tertiary education quality assessment criteria which set out the objectives, procedures for accreditation, and standards for tertiary education quality assurance, quality assurance boards, internal assessment and external assessment, accreditation recognition (MOET, 2004b). By this provisional regulation, for the first time, the Vietnam tertiary education achieved education quality standards with specific criteria such as missions and objectives, management of training curriculum and activities of Vietnam universities.

Based on this provisional regulation, the MOET advised 20 universities in pilot education quality assessment in 2006 whereby the standard accredited criteria were improved. The MOET promulgated a document known as the regulation on tertiary education quality assessment criteria, affirming that the main task of universities was to respond to the requirement of training human resources for local and national socio-economic development. The document includes ten criteria, namely university missions and objectives, organization management, education program, training activities, lecturers, officials and management staff, learners, academic research, application, development and transfer of technology, international collaboration, library resources, learning facilities, and financial management. These ten standards not only cover all aspects of a higher education enterprise but also responds well to the AUN-QA Standard 2.0 (2000). By this criterion set, Vietnam higher education had transparent system and mechanism for management (MOET, 2007).

In 2008, pilot education quality assessment was completed at 20 universities. The MOET constantly improved legal documents and the developing higher education quality accreditation system and carrying assessment of education institutions and training programs. In May 2008, the MOET issued alignment enhancing the quality assessment and education accreditation, setting a key task for the education quality assurance was to enhance the awareness of officials and lecturers on quality accreditation. The MOET considered school year (2009–2010) as the year of quality education assessment whereby universities were encouraged to register for international accreditation. By the end of 2009, Vietnam had 77 quality assurance institutions in universities, and 144 schools conducted self-assessments (77% of universities in Vietnam). By the end of 2009, Vietnam had 77 education quality assurance institutions in universities and 144 universities (accounted 77% of universities in Vietnam) practised self-assessed training quality. In addition, universities also paid attention to resources for training quality assurance. Specially, the MOET conducted universities to standardize and improve the training process including entrance examination quality, standard of lecturers and management officials, training program, financial management (MOET, 2009).

In 2012, Vietnam government promulgated Higher Education Law, institutionalizing education policies. For the first time, the tertiary education quality assurance was institutionalized by a legal document whereby tertiary education institutions were ranked to assess the prestige and quality of education, and to manage and invest by the state budget (Vietnam National Assembly, 2012). In this process, universities were encouraged to implement self-assessment including planning, collecting evidences, analyzing obtained information and evidence, writing self-assessment reports, and follow-up activities.

In 2013, the MOET established four Education Accreditation Centers, namely The Center for Education Accreditation, based at Viet Nam National University, Hanoi (VNU-CEA), The Center for Education Accreditation, based at Viet Nam National University in Ho Chi Minh City (CEA-HCM), Center for Education Accreditation, based at The University of Da Nang (CEA-UD), and The Center for Education Accreditation, based at Association of Vietnam Universities and Colleges (CEA-AVU&C). The establishment of these centers speaks volumes about the national commitment for better quality improvement in higher education.

In 2016, the MOET issued a circular on the higher education's training program quality assessment criteria. In most universities, this circular serves not only as the main legal document of training program quality self-assessment activities but also as the tool for assessment of training program quality (MOET, 2016).

In 2017, the MOET promulgated the circular on quality accreditation of tertiary education institutions including quality assurance of the system, functions, the process of education quality accreditation, internal-assessment, external assessment, assessment result recognition. The universities based on this quality assessment criteria to assess their activities to constantly improve education quality. In addition, this circular also provided universities a reference framework for explaining the education quality to stakeholders (MOET, 2017). With efforts to implement more effective policies and guidelines on education quality assurance, the accreditation of educational institutions and training programs advanced significantly during 2016–2017. According to a report by the MOET, in October 2017, in Vietnam, 214 universities completed self-assessment reports; of which 93 were accredited by the Overseas Assessment Center, 57 were accredited with quality standards (MOET, 2017a). According to statistics from the MOET, in 2017, in Vietnam, five higher education institutions accredited by the international accreditation organization (MOET, 2017b).

TABLE 2. Education Institutions were accredited by the international accreditation organization

Name of education institution	Accreditation organization	Date	Result	Certificate	
				Date	Valuable date
The Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology	HCERES	March 2017	R	June 12th2017	June 2022
	AUN-QA	January 2017	R	October 10th2017	October 2022
Da Nang University of Technology	HCERES	March 2017	R	June 12th2017	June 2022
Hanoi University of Technology	HCERES	March 2017	R	June 12th2017	June 2022
College Building	HCERES	March 2017	R	June 12th2017	June 2022
Hanoi University of natural sciences	AUN-QA	September 2017	R	February 20th2017	February 2022

In late 2017, 20 Vietnamese education institutions with 92 programs completed assessment that based on regional and international standards; Seven domestic standards assessment programs. The international quality accreditation organizations include the ASEAN University Quality Assurance Network, the French Engineering Qualification Committee, the U.S.A Technical and Technology Assessment Council, The International Business Management Program Accreditation Council, the Association of MBAs, the International Business Education College Association, and the European Technology Training Accreditation Network.

4. CONCLUSION

The point-view of Vietnam higher education quality assurance has experienced major modifications over the three phases. Before 1986, the higher education quality was characterized by its rigorous top-down control whereby high-stake examinations involved highly competitive pressure. During the reform period, many universities expanded their training scale and paid more attention to institutional needs than nation-wide competition. They realized that to improve training quality assurance,

there was the need to increase funding (mainly through tuition fees and state funding), magnify training scale, providing more learning opportunities for learners, renovating training programs, as well as raising the leadership and management capacities. In the third phase, Vietnam integrated in the international higher education quality assurance through applying the international education quality accreditation criteria to assess Vietnam higher education quality. This transformation marked a big step forward in Vietnam higher education quality management and Vietnam universities' integration into the world education.

Despite all the above efforts, higher education quality assurance system has not been fully developed, the Vietnam government launched new mechanisms for the education development, for example, establishing the national quality assurance organizations, quality assurance systems from the MOET to universities, launching regulations on higher education training program accreditation. The MOET also paid attention to train professional accreditation staff. In particular, Vietnam has joined the regional and international higher education quality assurance network.

Alongside many achievements, the Vietnam higher education quality has more to be desired before it can rank as world-class quality. Until now, Vietnam has no National Council for education quality accreditation. The quality assurance is not internal demand for the purpose of self-improvement of universities it is reaction for requirement of the MOET. Arguably, the quality assurance system remains lacking in high-caliber professional facilitators.

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